

Checking Yourself Out

Research shows that regular skin self-exams could save 4,500 lives annually. And there's new hope if you've already had malignant melanoma. This spring Memorial Sloan-Kettering made news with a vaccine that will one day immunize those who have had melanoma against recurrences of the cancer; it will also help protect those with a genetic predisposition. "The exact role of heredity in melanoma is unclear," says Dr. Houghton, the chief researcher in the vaccine study. "However, heredity is a factor in one in 20 persons with melanoma, and you can inherit a melanoma gene."

How often you should perform skin self-exams depends on how high your risk is. Here's how to do one:

- After showering, check yourself in a well-lighted room using a full-length mirror and a hand-held mirror.
- Start by checking moles and birthmarks you've had since birth. Look for changes, especially a new mole or skin discoloration, a sore that does not heal, or any change in

the size, shape, texture, or color of an existing mole.

- Look at the front and back of your body in the mirror. Then raise your arms and look at your left and right sides.
- Bend your elbows and look carefully at your fingernails, palms, forearms, and upper arms.
- Examine the back, front and sides of your legs. Look between the buttocks and around the genital area.
- Sit and closely examine your feet, including the toenails, soles, and spaces between the toes.
- Look at your face, neck, ears, and scalp. Use a comb or hair dryer to move your hair so that you can see better. Or get someone else to check your scalp for you.
- If you find anything suspicious, visit a dermatologist right away and ask for a full-body exam.

Source: Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center
